

## Muslims in the Media April 2009

*Opening talk given to conference on "Muslims in Britain" at Exeter University by Tim Llewellyn, former BBC Middle East Correspondent and now freelance writer and broadcaster on Middle East affairs.*

Since I started in Middle East journalism, being sent on assignment to Lebanon by the BBC in the spring of 1974, there has been an enormous transformation in the reporting and portrayal of Muslims in the print and broadcast media and in the explanation and coverage of the whole question of Islam. Alas, it has not always been for the better, and it has not been nearly transformed enough, as I shall argue.

When I set out, 35 years ago, Israel's standing as a widely perceived western-style democracy, triumphantly fighting off the alien forces who wished to destroy it, an island of good in a sea of evil, was very largely unchallenged in the Western media or by most of the Western political systems. Even if the oil embargo, the Arabs' limited successes in the 1973 October war and the surge of settlement building in the Occupied Territories were rattling nerves among those who actually thought seriously about the Middle East and were bothered to search below the surface of things, the broad perceptions in the media were that Israel was essentially "a good thing" and that Arabs were, by and large, either a menace or so incompetent as not to be worth consideration or support.

Analyses such as the splendid "Publish It Not...The Middle East Cover-Up", by Christopher Mayhew and Michael Adams, published in 1975, a rigorous exposé of pro-Israeli bias in British politics and press were notable for their rarity and the visceral attacks on them by most of the establishment as well as for their honesty, skill and accuracy. In fact, rarity is the wrong word: that book was unique in its time, and its findings not to be echoed or repeated in print or in public forum for many years\*.

However, "Israel unquestioned" was in the early 1970s a concept that was beginning to change even as I got off the plane at Beirut International Airport in May 1974, and I quickly discovered from the experienced journalists and diplomats I met on the ground that a new way of thinking about and construing Israel was gathering force.

First, the contact between Western journalists and the Palestinian movement, on the ground in Lebanon, in the refugee camps, in the various political cadres of the PLO and the fringe groups outside it---all these based in Lebanon now and firmly entrenched there since the late 1960s---gave journalists ample opportunity to hear and understand the Palestinian case and delve into Palestinian history, much of it ignored and obscured, deliberately, in the two and half decades since 1948. Further, there were many educated, displaced Palestinians and Palestinian interlocutors and supporters in Lebanon's rich society, doctors, teachers, lawyers, bankers, journalists, academics, businessmen, who were even more easily accessible to us, and who could tell their story and Palestine's story over dinners and drinks, in cafes and at seminars, and reshape our views of the Middle East and more fully inform us about the real nature of Palestine's loss and the reasons for it.

This process was to be continued in Israel and the Occupied Territories in the late 1970s and 1980s as the media teams and press corps based in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv began to develop from a few mainly Jewish and pro-Zionist stringers, many with Israeli citizenship, to a more independent corps of foreign journalists, British, American, Canadian, French, German, Danish, Norwegian, who brought with them a far more sceptical attitude towards Israel. Ironically, the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories gave these Israel-based journalists ready and easy access to the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza --- at a time when, in the late 1970s, these West Bankers and Gazans themselves were becoming more and more politically aware and organised (as exemplified by, for example, the pro-PLO local elections of 1977, and Israel's violent response to them).

Israel, too, was beginning to make errors---its savage little invasion of Lebanon in 1978, which the Western press observed close up and reported negatively, its outcome a stern order (UN SEC Cncl Res 425) to Israel to withdraw from Lebanon, which it did not fulfil, leaving a large Israeli-controlled zone in the south with a proxy Israeli-Lebanese army in charge; the massive invasion and slaughter in Lebanon by Israel in 1982, possibly Israel's most disastrous venture in terms of its international image until that time, resonating via the TV screens in living-rooms in Europe and North America in a much more visceral way than could ever have been the case in the less pervasive media eras of, say, 1956 or 1948.

In 1978 and 1979, the Islamic Revolution in Iran began to open up the world of Islam and the power of that religion and its cohorts on the Middle East scene---a phenomenon it must now seem incredible to believe was inchoate in the early 1970s and was certainly barely discernible in media reporting. Journalists and journalistic institutions had to begin at the bottom of a steep learning slope when it came to Islam, to Shi'ism, to Iranian and Gulf history, to the larger Middle Eastern world beyond the Israel-Palestine question---though as I will argue, despite the fact that some have climbed that steep hill of learning many have failed and many have climbed only to slip back. Given that it is now thirty years since that Revolution and thirty years since we in Lebanon started detecting the first manifestations of religious-political upheaval among the Shi'a, the first murmurings of Islamic politics as we know them today, the western media's treatment and understanding of such matters is a lot less further advanced than it has been.

My basic argument in this talk is that while, for perhaps twenty or twenty-five years, Western media understanding of and reporting of the Middle East in all its aspects, whether of Israel-Palestine or of Islamism or of the many connections between the two, did improve enormously and the public did become more educated---with Israel's harmonious and sanctified position as morally unassailable much diminished in both Europe and the US---it did not by any means improve enough; and the signs are today, especially I am afraid within my old alma mater, the BBC, which is such a paramount, vital purveyor of news inside and outside Great Britain, that the media are slipping back. Intense Israeli and pro-Israeli pressures have undermined BBC and other institutions' reporters and reporting. The pressure on bosses and producers alike has augmented what are anyway underlying biases

built into the British system, an attitude among the news managers and editors who sit in London of “them” and “people like us”, an inbuilt way of thinking built on Western education that the Israelis are past-masters at exploiting.

And let me say this immediately: I do not blame the Israelis for their methods or for trying it on. I do not even object to their blatant lies and prevarications. This is what people and peoples under pressure or fighting what they see to be wars of survival, this is what they do. I blame our pusillanimous news managers and systems, including our British political parties, all of them, for weakly falling prey to these machinations and not having the puissance or the intelligence to stand up to them.

For the purposes of this talk I am going to concentrate on modern reporting of the Middle East, particularly Israel-Palestine. And if I seem to concentrate on the BBC, I make no apologies for this, because, as I said earlier, the BBC has enormous sway in the West, way beyond Britain, and way beyond the domestic bulletins on TV and Radio 4 that are I imagine the basic outlets we in this room will be familiar with. The overseas services on radio and TV, the spread of domestic BBC news abroad via satellite and broadband relay, the BBC websites, all these make the BBC one of the most powerful news-disseminators on this earth. And what is even more worrying, pernicious even, is that the BBC is perceived generally to be fair and even-handed. This is no longer true, as regards the Middle East, and especially Israel and its relationship with its neighbours, and more and more people like myself, ex-BBC, inside the BBC (very quietly) and in the media generally are well aware that there has been a massive change in the BBC’s reporting in this area since the very early months of this new millennium.

As Camp David failed in the summer of 2000, and the Aqsa Intifada began its course towards the end of that year, Israel mounted a supreme public relations effort, a millions of dollars effort, especially in Britain, to see that the mistakes it had made in soiling its image in 1982, the invasion of Lebanon and the Sabra-Chatila massacre, and in 1987-90, with the first intifada, in which Israel reacted with bullets to the stones and catapults of the Palestinians, to see that these mistakes were not made again. They have succeeded with the BBC if not with the public opinion that that media is supposed to mould, an indication that the British people are not as feeble and manipulable as their media.

My broad argument is that between about 1975 and the year 2000, BBC reporting of the Middle East was transformed: it was never perfect, and nothing in journalism ever could be. But those many of us in the field in those 25 or so years were never subjected to the editing, manipulation, pressures and pro-Israeli, pro-British Government “guidance”, if I can use that word, that is the lot of the unfortunate BBC correspondent or producer who ventures in to the Middle East these days. It is on the news reporting which I wish to concentrate on, particularly of the Middle East.

WHY?

The single most important issue that concerns Muslims all over the world, including here in the West and particularly in Britain, today is the Israel-Palestine question. This more than

any other single story or situation lies brutally at the heart of Arab and Muslim resentment of the West and the West's continued and malign power in the world. It epitomises Western carelessness about and ignorance of another people's rights, to life, dignity, human and political rights, freedom of worship and movement.

More than in any other sector of world politics this attitude is manifested towards a people that is very largely Muslim, the Palestinians, and beyond that to Arabs in general---to the Lebanese, the Iraqis, the Syrians, but most obviously and terribly towards the Palestinians. And not only any longer, certainly since the year 2006, can this be seen as mere carelessness or ignorance.

The West, through the United Nations and the European Union, is positively backing Israel in its campaign of almost genocidal attrition against the Palestinians---(until the date of this talk at least, we all have hopes of the new American administration)---and its massive assault on the democratically elected Government the Palestinians voted for more than three years ago, because of the presence in that government of the Islamic party Hamas.

These are acts of **co**-mission now, not of **o**-mission, and it is in this context that it requires the BBC and other media to be absolutely on the *qui vive* to see that their reporting of the crisis is honest, fair and accurate and the events in that constantly unrolling story put in their correct context.

This is not happening; and whether it is happening by accident or design does not really matter (I believe it is more the former than the latter). It is not happening.

Let me explain.

First, no matter how many thoughtful programmes and discussions go out at various times of the day or night, the broader public makes its views on the basis of news reports and reactions to those reports; and you can be sure that the more sensible and balanced the programme and or discussion the later at night it will be, the more minority the channel it will appear on. Secondly, when it comes to news, the BBC is the biggest single purveyor of this commodity in Britain, and especially news from and about the world overseas.

#### *Disaster Emergency Committee Appeal:*

I want first, because it is so timely and so indicative of New BBC Thinking, to look at this disastrous BBC decision from a slightly different angle than has been approached before (the BBC ruled in late January 2009 that in the interests of "balance" it could not and would not show a TV appeal by *bona fide* charities and NGOs for aid and funds for the Gazans after the Israeli onslaught of post-Christmas period 2008/9).

Now ask yourselves, apart from the intrinsic pro-Israeli stance and Israeli-induced terror that this decision advertises within the highest realms of BBC management, how did the decision appear to Arabs, to Muslims, here in Britain, and to other peoples in Asia and

Africa, in Europe and Latin America? What did it tell them about the attitudes of the British as represented by the one organisation, the BBC, that epitomises Britain and the British media and is the chosen source of news on the Middle East and on Islam by many millions of people not just here watching their TV screens but all over the world, listening, watching and going on-line?

What did it tell them about our view in the British media world of them? What did it tell them about our view of impartiality---that central bar that BBC news rests on, the banner the BBC hoists over all its broadcasting as a golden one, a golden rule: fairness, balance, impartiality?

It told them, in one stroke, that “impartiality” is a concept devised by a superior Westerner who essentially agrees that to do anything that might remotely be seen to reflect on Israel is *not* to be impartial. In a word, impartiality in this area means tiptoeing around Israel’s sensitivities and mashing the toes of the millions upon millions of people who are in a state of near-shock because of that has happened to the Gazans. I am not here even beginning to try to assess what every single Palestinian, inside and outside Gaza, will now think of the BBC---perhaps they will not be surprised after all.

The decision, in a word, told all Muslims: you don’t count, you don’t really matter when it comes to it. When it comes to the BBC’s remit and responsibilities, these are to our possible critics in Whitehall and Westminster, and to those interested parties whom we must do all in our power not to upset. In this case, the latter are Israel and its massive phalanx of powerful and wealthy supporters, its ever-vigilant government, so well represented here by supporters, sympathisers and diplomats and by such enormous bodies as the three main political parties “Friends of Israel” formations.

YOU---the listeners, viewers and readers---especially those many of you who are horrified by what we have been showing you during the past four weeks, and who wish perhaps to do something for the victims of this military assault on a helpless and trapped civilian population---YOU do not figure in our equation. Impartiality must be displayed to the bosses’ satisfaction, not to the public’s. It is, the BBC has decided, up to the helpless to prove that their case is justifiable, and they have not proved it so---purely and simply because of who they are. They are Muslims, their attackers are Israelis, and our Government supports Israel and we cannot be seen even to risk upsetting Israel.

It is as simple as that. It is so blatant that even a couple of British ministers appeared to disagree with the decision, and politicians who criticised the BBC were themselves attacked by some parties for trying to put political pressure on the BBC. A fine irony this when we know that the greatest pressure of all on the BBC is from Israel and its friends and supporters (including the British Government), or is perceived by the easily rattled men in suits at the top of the organisation to be Israel, and therefore strong and undeniable.

This, I am afraid, is what colours the British media’s in general, and the BBC’s in particular, attitudes to the most telling story at the nerve centre of East/Muslim---West/Judaeo-Christian relations. It is largely dismissive, careless and uninformative.

Let me go back to the simple decision. After more than three weeks of post-Christmas military attack by Israel on Gaza, and the clear evidence of the deaths of some 1500

people, mostly civilian and many of those women and children, the BBC refused to show an appeal for relief, humanitarian relief, for the victims, the maimed, injured, displaced, homeless and traumatised. This was despite the fact that the appeal was mounted by a group of recognised and respected independent NGOs and humanitarian organisations such as the Red Cross, Oxfam, MAP, the UN and Save the Children Fund, and that the resulting aid and/or funds would be monitored and distributed by these same organisations.

The BBC's decision was basically this: these Palestinians are not a valid humanitarian case because the people who caused their plight did it for political reasons and we the BBC cannot go there because we might be thought to be taking sides. The sub-text of this of course is that the BBC might be seen by supporters of Israel and Israel itself to be taking sides, against Israel, by helping its enemies and opponents, whose governing body--- Hamas---is seen by our paymasters, the British Government, to be a bunch of terrorists.

A further sub-text, and one that will not have gone unnoticed again by Muslims and Arabs and those of us who painstakingly follow the British media's coverage of this particular issue, is that the BBC is making a false equivalence between the situation of an occupied and militarily subdued, isolated people without recourse to proper government or the rule of law, and a modern, highly militarised state which is occupying and terrorising these same people in pursuit of a now 42-year occupation of their land. It has done and still does this in its news reporting, what I have called many times in print and in lectures a spurious equivalence, implying that two equal contestants with equal rights and strength are in dispute over a territory.

This is the backbone, the bottom line, of BBC reporting of the Israel-Palestine issue, and it is a notably false premise.

Enhancing this is the dehumanising of the Palestinian experience---we do not hear names, read narratives of individuals as we do with Israelis; when an Israeli dies we read and hear of a real person's demise; when a Palestinian dies he is a cipher. Lack of access to the West Bank and Gaza but also an attitude of empathising with "people like us" (Israelis, who live and look like Westerners and lead lives comparable to ours), which comes so easily and naturally to a studio-bound editor or writer or producer in his London block, these are what inform so much of the BBC's and other British institutions' hasty and skimpy coverage. My argument is not against some of the excellent reporters in the field, it is against the dreadful system they are forced to serve. Sometimes I feel that the reporters in the Middle East are making as much effort to circumvent their masters' constraining guidelines and the spurious balance that involves as they are in accessing their stories in the first place.

We hear it in the language: Arabs "kidnap", Israelis "capture". A suicide bomb is an atrocity, but a bomb on an apartment block is an attack. A dead Israeli on a bus is murdered, but a Palestinian hit by a guided missile is killed.

The day-to-day humiliations and belittlings of the Palestinians are not reported because they are cumulative and horrible in the accumulation, and therefore we have little context for the attacks on Israel that this constant grinding-down inevitably produces. The sporadic nature of BBC reports on Palestinian rockets and attacks fails to take in the reasons for those attacks.

The reporting continually assumes that a two-state solution is the answer; that the Palestinians' problems began in 1967, not in 1948; all these are assumptions Israel and our politicians wish us to make, and the BBC falls in with these guidelines with ease and without question, with the exception of the few genuine interlocutors allowed on the air and the reporting of one or two professional journalists like the Middle East editor, Jeremy Bowen, who himself is under more and more pressure. To give you one example: I recently heard Bowen doing an excellent report on the aftermath of the assault on Gaza, when he and other mainstream Western reporters were finally allowed proper access by the Israelis.

It was a graphic account, from Gazans, of their suffering and the consequences of the killing and bombing. But hold on---at the end of this report from Gaza, Bowen tagged on a completely irrelevant little segment from Sderot, one of the towns just outside Gaza that had been subjected to what our media like to call "rains" of rockets from Hamas. Sderot was a story---certainly. But it was another story, for another day. But I know why Bowen tagged it on. He knew his bosses would want "balance". In fact, the Sderot contribution was derisory, an inhabitant saying uncontroversially and unnecessarily there should be a two-state solution. I like to think Jeremy Bowen did this deliberately, to indicate to those of us in the know his own contempt for such machinations, these being vital for him to get the real story on the air.

The British media attitude to the Palestinian Arabs is broadly this: To those that hath shall be given, to those who hath not shall be taken away.

*To put it another way, sorry Gazans, I am afraid you are the wrong sort of victims.*

How do you think Muslims, in Britain and elsewhere, appreciate this arrogant denigration of them and their views and their fellow-Muslims' degraded situation? I can tell you, as a non-Muslim and a former employee of the BBC, it makes me very angry indeed. Can you imagine how a Palestinian, or a Pakistani, or an Egyptian, or an ordinary Moroccan, Syrian, Iraqi or Jordanian feels?

For all the efforts the BBC and the other organs of the British media have made over the years, a crass piece of decision-making like this can set us back decades, and I am sure, listening to many of my normally rational colleagues in the various worlds I inhabit---journalists, family, academics, British, Arab, Jewish, American, European, just plain *ordinary*---that it has added significantly to a growing disbelief in the BBC's performance, in this crucial area particularly. People who normally would pay little attention to the Middle East have joined forces with those of us who do have close concerns and have followed the fortunes of this area minutely during the past few decades.

The BBC's decision did not go down very well either in the British press: according to the excellent monitoring body Arab Media Watch ([www.arabmediawatch.com](http://www.arabmediawatch.com)), whose surveys I recommend to all of you, and whose highest recommendation yet may well be that it is so fair and accurate on these questions that it has come in for the special attention and overwhelming odium of Melanie Phillips, Arab Media Watch found that in the nine-day period after this BBC blunder 76% of national newspaper editorials were AGAINST the BBC, even Melanie's favoured organ, the Daily Mail. Even greater proportions of comment against the BBC were reflected across the board in newspaper articles and readers' letters.

The BBC made this decision hastily, and only a few people right at the top of the BBC tree, close to the Director-General, would have had any say in it.

They seem to have ignored the fact that the BBC's news coverage of the Middle East, most particularly of Israel/Palestine, has in recent years---I would say most heavily since the beginning of the decade and up to about 2005 or 6---come under consistent and quite scientifically based attack from a wide range of critics. These criticisms were broadly that at crucial moments in the conflict the BBC failed to cover events with sufficient care, control and---most important---sufficient background information and accurately-administered context. In 2006, an independent report commissioned by what was then still the Board of Governors said that BBC domestic news programmes failed to give proper background to stories and left the general public ill-informed and often uninterested; that it failed to report "the difficulties faced by the Palestinians in their daily lives. ...in the months preceding the (2006) Palestinian elections there was little questioning of their leaders." The report said there was "an imbalance" in the reporting of the implications for the Palestinians of the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in 2005.

The same report noted "the failure to convey adequately the disparity in the Israeli and Palestinian experience, reflecting the fact that one side is in control and the other lives in occupation". It added: "...coverage should succeed in this if in nothing else."

One side, it said, is wholly under the occupation of the other [and] endures the indignities of dependence."

I must say I noted that during the recent Gaza coverage there was the same lack of emphasis on the Palestinians' position, especially when it came to the framing of reports in London and the questioning of participants on the spot or of so-called experts in London:

It was rarely if ever pointed out that it was the Israelis who were responsible for breaking the long ceasefire that had been in operation since June of 2008 until November;

It was never explained that Palestinian rockets from Gaza are retaliation for Israelis' continued attacks on Gaza and its eternal state of siege on the Territory as well as the myriad Israeli assassinations, incursions and bombardments that have been so systematic since 2000 that the world has practically ceased to record them they are so "routine".;

Among many points not made were that the Palestinians under attack had no means of escaping from the battle scene, the first time I can recall in recent history where people could not seek refuge from gunfire (it is now true that Sri Lanka is emulating Israel in this); that while Israelis under threat from Palestinian rockets could leave town and find immediate and sophisticated relief and medical help anywhere in the country, not only did the Palestinians have little such recourse but the very limited facilities they did have were themselves under attack.

Neither did I hear anyone make the point that the Israeli towns that do come under attack, Sderot, Beersheva, Ashkelon, Ashdod, were all once, until 1948, the home towns or villages of the refugees who now make up the vast majority of the population and therefore the victims of Gaza.



I must say I had thought that since this Impartiality report and the wave of other informed criticism that had washed over and through the BBC in the first half of the first decade of this millenium, most of it to the effect that the lacunae and carelessness in coverage tended by accident if not design or endemic bias to favour the Israeli case, coverage had improved somewhat. The appointment of a first-rate Middle East editor and a much stronger news team on the ground in Israel and indeed inside the Occupied Territories had had an effect, though it was always evident to me that coverage of Iraq, say, or the Lebanon invasion of 2006, were on the whole much more "balanced" in a correct manner than say the withdrawal from Gaza, whose real reasons and implications were rarely explored.

However, this critical moment in Israel's violent history---the invasion of Gaza---showed the BBC up again, not because of weak reporting but because of the casting of the story from London, the balance in the questions and coverage, the lack of background and the complete failure to examine cause and effect. It was also noticeable to me, as ever, that the BBC broadly made little effort to make adequate use of the many knowledgeable Arab and other commentators who inhabit London and the UK, preferring to rely on known faces who repeat the conventional views of the area and the easy wisdoms . Two expert commentators I know personally, both Palestinian, one a Gazan, both of whom live in easy proximity to the BBC's myriad studios and who in duller times appear regularly, were hardly called on at all during the recent crisis. The Israeli ambassador, Mr Prosor, and his voice of them all in Jerusalem, Mark Regev, were rarely off the air. The Palestinians have an ambassador in London and I do not know how often he was used, but I do know---thanks to Arab Media Watch again---that in the British printed press Mr Prosor appeared in some form or other 20 times more often than the Palestinian representative, Mr Hassassian. By the way, all of these Palestinians I have mentioned speak excellent English.

Those in Palestine quite often do not and here again there is an imbalance. The BBC has told me that to try to make up for this imbalance of opportunity, accessibility and talent as between the wealthy state of Israel and the shattered collection of Bantustans and politically divided entities that is occupied Palestine, this would amount to *campaigning* journalism. In other words, if the Palestinians are at a loss and incompetent or severely disadvantaged by circumstances then it is not to the BBC to try to correct this.

But surely it should make the effort? And if it has failed so signally to make proper use of the Middle East resources available in London then that is another kick in the teeth for fairness and another slight to the Arabs and Muslims and their many supporters who pay the licence fee.

Again, it's sorry...but you're the wrong kind of consumer. Imbalance and unfairness is part of life and it is not up to us to make the effort to correct this.

And just in these past few days there has been another blow against fair BBC reporting. As a result of an official complaint by two ardent Zionists, both of whom work for Israel's cause and betterment in this country, the BBC Management Trust, which has alas replaced the Board of Governors, actually upheld this *parti-pris* criticism of one of the more beneficial outcomes of that previous Impartiality Report by the now defunct Governors: the appointment of Jeremy Bowen as BBC Middle East editor.

One of the Trust's rulings, that Bowen had been mistaken not to source a report which said that the US regarded Israeli settlements in the West Bank as illegal, was just plain wrong, and ignorantly wrong at that, demonstrating that the denizens of the Trust have no knowledge of Middle East current politics (all the five permanent members of the UN Security Council hold the settlements to be illegal, and there is no need whatever to source such a fact); the other ruling was a minor matter of interpretation that certainly any respectable and informed Middle East Correspondent would have made in an opinion piece (this was a From Our Own Correspondent piece in which Bowen gave the opinion that Israel had done everything it could over the years to dislodge the Palestinians from their lands—hardly a controversial insight!). I certainly would have, and did, on many occasions between 1974 and 2000, both as a staff member of and freelance contributor to the BBC, and no-one said a word.

What this ruling did was, again, show that at the highest reaches of the BBC sensitivity towards the Israeli case is paramount. This will not be lost on the Muslim and Arab licence-payers, nor will it be lost on the people in the Middle East and South Asia with whom BBC reporters and producers and cameramen on the ground have to deal.

There is a further point. The BBC has now undermined its own expert, a former colleague of mine when I was in my last years as Middle East Correspondent and he was in his bright formative years as a new and alarmingly brilliant young reporter. I have heard, since 2005 and his appointment, Jeremy expertly and bravely reporting and explaining the Middle East and on occasion twisting himself into and out of various reportorial convolutions as he tries to meet BBC requirements and tell the truth---and he has very largely and magnificently succeeded, where others have failed, because of his knowledge and authority *vis a vis* the BBC as well as within his area of expertise. Now he has been undermined and savaged by his own organisation the awful shade of self-censorship will weigh more heavily upon him.

He will resist it because of his authority. But imagine the effect such a ruling, such a crass and ill-informed ruling, will have on junior and lesser reporting mortals than Jeremy Bowen. ([www.guardian.co.uk/media/2009/apr/15/bbc-trust-jeremy-bowen-middle-east](http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2009/apr/15/bbc-trust-jeremy-bowen-middle-east))

It is worth looking at what the Impartiality Report said of its eponymous topic: a “formulaic application” of balance or impartiality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict “could produce coverage which misleads from the outset”. This formulaic application was made in the case of the appeal by the emergency committee and is as harmful and dangerous as any misleading coverage when it comes to communicating Muslims to Muslims via the airwaves. It says, broadly, you do not matter.

It appears to me that when the situation gets hot for Israel, now, as it did in 2000, again in 2002 and 2003, in Gaza in 2005 and Lebanon in 2006, and now again in Gaza in a big way in 2008/9, this is when Israel applies its most intensive pressure, through phone calls, letters and emails to every level of BBC management and production, through limitations of coverage, through a barrage of lies and half-truths that baffle an ill-informed public and a pretty lacklustre team of interlocutors in studios in London. Given the speed of communications these days, the massive output, the lack of time for proper checking and reading and the endemic biases and attitudes of many London-based editors, who sit inside their gleaming electronic towers, it is not surprising that coverage tends to tell a distorted story.

I have much more detail on this, but I think we should move on beyond Gaza a little and on to what I make of programming on Islam more generally, though as I have said earlier I think news coverage and instant reactions in current affairs programmes on TV and radio play a much larger role in shaping public opinion than can the more thoughtful programmes.

**(“Report of the Independent Panel for the BBC Governors of on Impartiality of BBC Coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict”, April 2006.**

**[http://www.bbbcgovernorsarchive.co.uk/docs/reviews/panel\\_report\\_final.txt](http://www.bbbcgovernorsarchive.co.uk/docs/reviews/panel_report_final.txt)**

**[http://www.bbbcgovernorsarchive.co.uk/docs/reviews/reviews/israelipalestiniangovernors\\_statement](http://www.bbbcgovernorsarchive.co.uk/docs/reviews/reviews/israelipalestiniangovernors_statement)**

**“Bad News from Israel”, by Greg Philo and Mike Berry of the Glasgow Media Group at Glasgow University, Pluto Press 2004**

**“Tell Me Lies: Propaganda and Media Distortion in the Attack on Iraq”, edited by David Miller**

**“Publish It Not: The Middle East Cover-Up”, with a new introduction by Tim Llewellyn, Signal Books, Oxford, 2006)**

**LET US take some major controversies of the past few years and see how the media dealt with them:**

The Danish cartoons: our take was freedom of expression. But “freedom of expression” in the West is always tempered somehow, more lately by libel laws and restrictions on intrusions on privacy, less about depictions of Christ. BUT, surely, the press has a duty to be sensitive to people not protected by law or Western norms? My view is that in the Salman Rushdie case and in the case of the Danish cartoons the British and western media climbed on their high horse and ignored the sensitivities of a significant group of people.

It was conveniently overlooked that in Denmark, for example, there was a heavy atmosphere and much real evidence of anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant feeling, even in senior political circles. Denmark had passed strict anti-immigration laws, and the right-wing Danish People’s Party had publicly and officially equated “Islam” with “terrorism”. In this context, poking fun at Mohammed was in no way comparable, say, to blasphemous images of Christ in a mainly secular if officially Christian, north-European society. **(See “Muslim Rage, Western Fear and the Clash of Civilisations: Stereotypic Construction in the World Press’s Coverage of the Danish Cartoon Controversy of 2006, by David S. Kaufer and Amal M. Malki)**

Worse, Europe’s Muslim peoples are often squeezed into a narrow and hopeless band between the insensitivities of host societies with a historical and often modern record of anti-Islamic and anti-immigrant feeling, and the leaderships in their own home countries where dictatorial and/or ultra-conservative and doctrinaire rulers or public attitudes dictate how people live. For the average, law-abiding but observant Muslim there is little room to

manoeuvre; but the Western media, who like to see things in black and white---freedom of speech v NO freedom of speech---are not likely to take this into account.

There is a tendency, also, when controversies of this sort come up—and especially when allegations of terrorism or puritanical behaviour are in the air---for journalists to adopt the stance of interrogators, judges, rather than interlocutors or seekers after information. One good example of this---all-too-typical---came recently from a BBC “Panorama” journalist with a fine record in investigative reporting, one of the programme’s veteran stalwarts. Unfortunately, in this example, John Ware shows that Islam is a case too far for his balanced understanding.

In a BBC4 interview with Inayat Bunglawala, of the Muslim Council of Britain, on July 14, 2005, Ware consistently tries to put him on the spot. For example, he suggests in critical mode that the MCB’s Secretary-General, Sir Iqbal Sacranie, has described the Hamas leader Sheikh Yassin, who was murdered by the Israelis in an air strike on the elderly cripple’s wheelchair, as a renowned Islamic scholar, which of course he was. Ware emphasises that Sheikh Yassin “was the chief ideologist of an organisation[ Hamas] that’s charter seeks the destruction of Israel.”

There is no context here, no background as to the extreme suffering of Sheikh Yassin’s people in Gaza, just the lapidary thought dropped in out of nowhere, so to speak, that here is a man who wishes to destroy Israel. The fact that it is actually Israel that is busy destroying what’s left of Palestine is not hinted at. It is also interesting to note here that in British media-speak the Israeli perception that anyone who wishes to re-establish Palestinian Arabs’ rights to their original land is always phrased in the polemical style of “wishing to destroy” Israel, or “wishing to throw Jews into the sea”.

Ware goes on to try to pillory the Muslim community, this time singling out Dr. Yusuf Karadawi. This man, Ware admits, has condemned the London suicide bombings unequivocally, but he has dared to voice guarded support for the resistance against Western forces in Iraq. This, says Ware, “...I guess would imply support for attacks on British soldiers...”

One has to ask, what is wrong with this? Many people in this country regard the Western invasion of Iraq as illegal and monstrous and are hardly being treasonable if they voice support for the resistance.

Bunglawala goes on himself later to point out that Muslims like himself find themselves trying to explain the phenomena of suicide bombs, why people are driven to carry out such extreme and terrible measures, why people are sympathetic to the Iraqi resistance, and that explaining is not necessarily and quite often certainly is not the same thing as justifying or trying to justify.

Ware’s attack mode---perhaps, to give him his due, to provoke a response---will certainly be seen by most Muslim and Arab viewers as a Western media grilling, again, putting senior British Muslims in the dock instead of trying to find out what makes individual Muslims do the things they do, think the way they do. The default mode of the media is that somehow Muslims always have a case to answer, are “other”, and therefore the enemy somehow.

It is not all bad news. Perhaps typically it was on Channel 4---which more and more seems to have replaced the BBC as the home of intelligent current affairs and news reporting---that in July last year put out a programme of two hours, in prime time no less, called "The Qu'ran", in which a reporter with thirty years experience in the Middle East and much genuine knowledge and inquiry under his belt, Antony Thomas, carried out a searching analyses of Muslim attitudes and views as evidence in the differing interpretations of verses from the Qu'ran. He did this with the skilled help of Muslim and other experts, sheikhs, academics, British, Asian and Arab, ordinary worshippers as well, here and overseas. He and they explored the Islamic relationship with Christianity, Islam's views of violence and Jihad, of women's rights and role in society.

The only jarring item was an episode devoted to female circumcision, which I have no doubt the producers or the "front office" forced on to Thomas to give the programme some sensational aspects. As you will all know, the practice of female circumcision in its various forms is not an Islamic one and is by no means confined to Muslim peoples, being common all over North and parts of sub-Saharan Africa and some areas of the Middle East, among all or among no religions.

Programmes like this do give one hope, and intelligent takes on the Muslim world and worlds are out there in the farthest reaches of the media, if you look for them, but unfortunately are all too rare in the mainstream, and all too often coverage is informed by the alarmingly parochial and conservative stances taken towards Muslims, Arabs, Palestine, foreigners, immigrants, "others" by our own political leaders, whose default position is to follow the tabloids.

It is a sad reflection on my trade, journalism, that still the best book on this topic is Edward Said's "Covering Islam", first published in 1981 and updated in 1997, more than ten years ago. We have not come far enough along the road he suggested way back then, not anything like far enough.

**(*"Covering Islam"*, by Edward Said, Vintage Books London; [www.british-tv.suite101.com/article.cfmchannel\\_4\\_the\\_quran](http://www.british-tv.suite101.com/article.cfmchannel_4_the_quran) )**